Letter-writing program too flippant

Every business depends on letters. For those too impatient to draft letters from scratch, there is a new program called LetterWare that provides a range of prewritten business letters from a disk.

The concept is great. If all you had to do every time you needed to write a letter was choose one that's already perfect, it could save countless hours of valuable time. This program attempts to meet this ideal, but is only partially successful. Here's what LetterWare offers:

■ 144 prewritten business letters. The letters are grouped by category and cover such topics as credit, orders, job applications, bids and proposals. The user selects from a series of menus to find the letter that suits his business needs. In many cases you can specify the tone of your letter. A collection letter can be "mild," "stronger," "serious" or "angry."

■ Fill-in capability with most letters. You can customize the oth-

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erwise fixed wording of the letters by typing in certain details such as dates, amounts or names. This process, too, is controlled by the overall menu system. In addition, you can add a postscript of several lines to any letter.

■ Write your own letters. If you can't quite express yourself with the prewritten variety, you can, after a fashion, write your own. There's room for 120 of your own creations, and they become accessible from the menu system for repeated use.

Print envelopes with your letters. LetterWare will "capture" the address block of your letter, combine it with your regular return address and print an envelope

on your printer. This process is easy on some printers but gets involved on laser printers and others.

When you're through with the minor customizing of a letter, you're given a chance to preview the letter on screen, print a draft or print the final product. The draft version is marked. You have the option of printing multiple copies and even of sending copies to other parties. If you like the look of a secretary's initials at the bottom, those can be included.

Unfortunately, the program has two serious faults that render it almost unusable.

First, many of the letters are flippant, poorly written or downright insulting. Second, the program does not allow you to adjust the canned wording in any way.

Also on the downside, while you can write your own letters from scratch with LetterWare, it's a slow and frustrating process. The program gives you just 17 lines to

type text onto in typewriter fashion. There is no word wrapping; if you make a change in the middle of the letter, you'll have to retype the remainder.

Most of the 144 letters in LetterWare, however, adhere to the conventions of standard business writing: They are clear and to the point. Some small-business proprietors might be quite content to use them verbatim.

■ The Bottom Line: While LetterWare has its faults, if you have the need to write standard letters and your business is suffering while you avoid the task, this program might help you.

LetterWare is published by CommonTouch, P.O. Box 21, Newton, Mass. 02159; (617) 964-7740. It costs $79.

Hillel Segal's weekly column evaluates gadgets, small-computer hardware and software, seminars, and books designed to enhance business productivity.